

CUSTOMER SERVICE-NECESSARY IN THE FIRE DEPARTMENT?

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

Presently, no available concrete evaluation criterion exists for determining appropriate customer service levels within the Fire Service. The purpose of the research was to evaluate the meaning of customer service and to research if customer service is necessary for the fire service in this new century. Its purpose was to provide information and to assist in developing programs and survey criteria for establishing customer service programs both internal and external. This information should be used to improve the service and efficiency of administrators and firefighters both within the career fire service including Palm Beach County Fire Rescue. The problem is that Palm Beach County Fire Rescue has been getting a growing number of citizen complaints from actions involved with medical and non-fire incidents. Through the use of evaluative methodology the following questions will be discussed:

1. Who is the Customer in today's fire service?
2. Is Customer service necessary for the survival of today's fire service?
3. What types of practices are changing the way modern Fire Departments operate in respect to Customer service?
4. What are the business considerations of maintaining positive customer service?

After problem identification, the topic was researched, narrowed and explored by utilizing available information from the LRC and the Palm Beach County Library System. Procedures included identifying the issue, completing a literature review and recommending possible solutions. The purpose of this paper

was to evaluate the importance of customer service in today's modern multi-mission emergency service.

Recommending constant monitoring on customer service issues, today's Fire Service can improve overall effectiveness through more efficient practices, improved communication with internal and external customers and greater system productivity. The results include a brief evaluation of present practices of customer service, descriptions of who the customer is and evaluation of business practices to improve service. Recommendations include greater communications between all members of the department and the public. Suggestions should be derived from grassroots rank and file involvement participation and input to facilitate such changes.

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INTRODUCTION

Customer service or service is possibly one of the most important parts of executive leadership. The relationship a public safety organization has and maintains with both its internal members and external citizens, guests, other area agencies and taxpayers may be the most important measure of its success. Furthermore, that relationship must start at the Executive level by empowering and taking care of internal personnel.

The buzzword of this era has been to do more with less, every public organization seems to be experiencing fiscal constraints of some type. This is going on while the leaders are trying to improve and expand services to their customers.

The problem is that Palm Beach County Fire Rescue has been getting a growing number of citizen complaints from actions involved with medical and non-fire incidents. Furthermore, this may be attributed to the lack of training in dealing with people during these scenes. Firefighters are generally trained to make rapid decisions in dangerous situations and often do not have to take people's feelings into consideration. Additionally, firefighters may feel medical and non-emergency incidents are not as important as the "real fire calls". This is something we as Executive Fire Officers must overcome.

The purpose of this paper was to evaluate the importance of Customer service in today's modern multi-mission emergency service. Furthermore, this paper discusses how to evaluate citizen feelings and views on the service of the Fire Rescue department.

This research paper utilized evaluative research methodology to answer the following questions:

1. Who is the Customer in today's fire service?
2. Is Customer service necessary for the survival of today's fire service?
3. What types of practices are changing the way modern Fire Departments operates in respect to Customer service?
4. What are the business considerations of maintaining positive customer service?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Executive Leadership course discussed analyzing system factors to determine areas that would directly contribute to a systems quality and effectiveness. Establishing a level of competency by focusing on personal effectiveness will ultimately overflow into the organization's competencies and improve it. Also, the Executive leadership course stressed the significance and the importance of proactive planning and having a vision for positive results such as good Customer Service relations, as opposed to reactive planning that occurs only when problems occur. The objectives stated in many reference materials often assume managers know how to effectively measure quality, set reasonable performance standards, properly intervene in program operations, and adequately monitor the system to measure its effectiveness (Wholey, Newcomer 1989).

Numerous Fire/EMS organizations in the United States have some type of Customer Service programs in place, specifically those organizations that provide full service EMS. Traditionally, these programs were put into existence because of perceived problems that occurred in a reactionary measure. Although having

any system will improve some facets of the service delivery, it does not do justice in comparison to what a complete Customer Service program can accomplish.

Discussion during the Executive Leadership course stressed the need to question paradigms, take calculated risks by introducing new concepts within organizations, and to “think outside the box.” The prerequisite reading material for the course also stressed the importance of taking care of the customer first (both internal and external) because this is the reason the organization exists.

The topic of Customer Service has been brought up quite frequently at staff meeting at PBCFR and it usually came up because of a recent citizen complaint. This was an instrumental reason why the author chose the topic and the evaluative methodology to explore the topic further.

This research project discusses and explores various system concerns and their relation to overall Customer Service. Additionally, this project explores the significance and importance of the research questions previously stated.

Palm Beach County Fire Rescue Background

Palm Beach County Fire Rescue (PBCFR) is a full service Fire Rescue/EMS Department. Their service area encompasses 550 square miles of unincorporated Palm Beach County, Florida and service is provided from 34 station locations. Palm Beach County Fire Rescue employs 962 personnel of which over 770 are assigned to Operations. Primary service is provided to a population of 575,000 and the total county population is over 1,000,000 (Palm Beach County Fire Rescue FY 1999 annual report). Additional background information on PBCFR shows that they provide service to both rural and urban areas and that their average response time encompasses all elapsed time from the moment the emergency call is received at central dispatch to the actual time a unit arrives on scene. Additionally, response times were recently all merged into one

"average department response time" including both Fire and EMS incidents as well as emergency and non-emergency incidents. This is a critical element of Customer Service because getting to the customer in a rapid fashion is extremely important. Furthermore, knowing exactly how long it took to get to a patient or customer is equally important if improvements are to be made.

Services provided by Palm Beach County Fire Rescue (PBCFR) include, but are not limited to: traditional fire suppression, emergency medical services, advanced life support ambulance transport, hazardous materials mitigation, special operations, fire investigations, fire inspections, plans review, code enforcement, home and business safety inspections, emergency dispatching, regional special operations, regional air-medical transport, regional hazardous material mitigation, aircraft rescue fire fighting, and regional dispatching. The annual call volume for fiscal year 1999 was 74,066 emergency incidents of which 54,163 were medical/EMS calls and over 20,000 resulted in patient transports. (These statistics were obtained from the PBCFR annual ALS Transport Statistical report). The call volume at PBCFR has been increasing over 5% annually for the last 4-5 years. There are currently thirteen hospitals within Palm Beach County and two of which are designated as trauma centers. The organizational structure of the department is as follows: the department is divided into six operational battalions, and an aviation battalion that provides Aircraft Rescue Fire Fighting and EMS to Palm Beach International Airport. Battalion's are supervised by Chief Officer's who work a 40-hour week and are on call for specific incidents. This Chief Officer supervises three District Chiefs who work the traditional 24/48 shift. The District Chiefs are responsible for their respective shifts (A, B, and C) within their battalions through Station officers and EMS Lieutenant's. Staffing of the typical units are three personnel for an engine/pumper crew and two or three personnel assigned to an EMS/transport unit. Advance Life Support ambulance

transport became the department's responsibility in March of 1995. Prior to that time, private ambulance providers provided advanced life support ambulance transport. PBCFR went through an arduous three-year effort convincing citizens and elected and appointed officials that emergency ALS Transport would be best administered under the auspices of the Fire/EMS department. Basic Life Support ambulance transportation still remains the responsibility of the private ambulance providers and PBCFR is presently working under a modified public/private partnership to facilitate this process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review of numerous documents utilizing an evaluative research process was the primary procedure used to facilitate this project. An effort to utilize recent information whenever possible was made. The information reviewed discusses the importance of the customer and people in any service organization. Fire departments are comprised of people who work for people who are supervised by people to serve people and the job of being responsible as an executive is to be responsive to them.

Information was gathered and evaluated through the National Emergency Training Center's Learning Resource Center (LRC), the Palm Beach County Public library system and through personal contacts with other Fire Rescue leaders through out Florida.

Information was reviewed to provide the researcher and the reader information about customer service and its effect on the delivery of emergency and non-emergency services at PBCFR.

The article written by Julias Halas, discussed that many Fire Executives are so overwhelmed by program administration and budget issues that they may

be missing the actual needs of their customers. He poses the question in this scenario; does the customer always come first? He goes on to discuss that the perceived needs of the community are what should come first its what Fire Service Executives should be channeling efforts towards programs aimed at customer needs. Halas also goes on to discuss positive internal customer service. He states that leaders must foster employees to believe in the programs if they are to promote them to our citizens. “Unless we inspire and empower our internal employees to participate and believe in a quality external customer (the citizens) service program, the results will fall far short of what is needed” (Halas, p.49, 1996).

Chief Halas feels Executive Fire Officers would make great efforts if they viewed their organizational charts upside down. In other words, the top management of the organization should serve as the support for the rest of the department and the citizens or the customer should be at the top of that group (Halas, p.49, 1996).

The article written by Bruce McClendon discussed some of the experiences Orange County Florida had improving their customer service practices. In his article he states that Customer service is an essential part of public service. “Yet, despite the growing need for local governments to recognize all of their citizens as valued customers, many service providers stubbornly refuse to treat the people they regulate as customers (McClendon, p.19, 1996). McClendon discusses how a government organization will not change until it changes how it thinks. In the Orange County government employees learn to view everyone as a customer. This process has allowed them to streamline regulations, measure results and enable an expectation for all employees to provide superior customer service.

Francis Holt discussed a very interesting problem with customer service known as cognitive dissonance. He describes this in the case of the fire service as the “concept of smiling and making nice to the public when in earshot and then sounding off and expressing how you really feel on the way back to quarters (Holt, p. 84, 1997). He gives an example of someone trying a new recipe requiring the baking of an apple pie in a brown paper bag and subsequently the fire department is summoned when the house is filled with smoke. Holt describes this condescending at best and one that will foster very negative attitudes between emergency responders and citizens. Holt goes on to discuss this “us and them” state of mind. This is rather interesting because this can also happen between management and labor in the internal customer service setting. It is common for Chief Officers to smile or say something “nice” to a firefighter then discuss how stupid his/her idea was with another Chief Officer. The same can happen when the Chief asks a firefighter something about his job. Holt’s discussion state that we should make effort on educating each other on other people’s issues then we will be able to openly discuss feelings and ultimately improve customer relations both internal and external. This was an interesting concept because it relates very well to the problems with the perceived Customer service issues at PBCFR.

Another important aspect of success with Customer service is to set boundaries and set standards on how to act within those boundaries. Chief Luther Fincher discussed some of these issues in his September 1993 article in *Firehouse* magazine. Chief Fincher addresses that most fire chiefs entered the fire service in a time when it only had one mission-fighting fire. He acknowledges that in this era of rapid change flexibility is a crucial element in quality customer service. He discusses that diversity is also an integral part in service. “Firefighters now come in all shades, sizes, and in both sexes. This requires adjustment in the way management deals with employees” (Fincher, p.18, 1993). “A fire service

manager must realize that members are internal customers as well as the department's most valuable asset" (Fincher, p.18, 1993). Fincher mentions that customer service is matching the appropriate resource to the needs of the customer. He goes on to discuss that managers do not always know the customers' needs and "Only the firefighters on scene will be able to make that judgment" (Fincher, p.18, 1993). "The key to creating customer satisfaction is to empower those who know customer' needs to satisfy them. Empowerment is scary, especially for fire service managers schooled only with the para-military paradigm" (Fincher, p.18, 1993). This is a very important statement because if we are to please and satisfy our citizens, customers, and patients we must listen to our personnel and likewise we must do what we feel is right for personnel if we want them to take care of the citizens.

The issue of fiscal scrutiny is always mentioned when analyzing any portion of a modern fire department. Jeffrey Smith brings up an important point in his August 1997 article in *Fire Engineering*. He discussed how the past perception on the Fire service was one that the public loves the firefighters and everything they did. The public knew where they were and when they called they were there. Smith feels times are changing, the cost of yesterday's fire service was minimal and in fact many departments were volunteers. "Today's fire service is under more scrutiny. The public perception now is, they are taking our tax dollars, so what are we getting for our money, and what else can we get?" (Smith, p.77, 1997).

Smith makes the correlation between private business and customer service, he discusses how in the business world the customer is in charge and the survival of the business depends on them. "However, it seems that some businesses are forgetting who really pays the bills. To them the customer is becoming an imposition, resulting in the demise of many of these businesses"

(Smith, p.77, 1997). The fire service must also not forget who pays the bills and it must make every effort to support and take care of the taxpayer. "Taxpayers are the fire department's customers- and boss" (Smith, p78, 1997). Smith discussed that the days of the fire service hiding in the stations are over, he claims the public wants to see them out doing something. "They may not know what the best value is, but they know they want it" (Smith, p.78, 1997). Smith warns that money is a very important issue and if someone could provide better service for a better price then the public will look at it. Smith states that every fire department should have a customer service program and all employees must have stake in its success. Furthermore, when a program is implemented, Smith suggests training be an integral part of it. "The customer also being the taxpayer has the power to replace the public department and to control the funding of the department. Customers satisfied with the value tend to keep the system status quo or support improving the system" (Smith, p80. 1997).

When customer service is evaluated and researched the Phoenix system must be looked at. Chief Brunacini's simple yet brilliant philosophy has made his department one of the leaders in Customer satisfaction. Chief Brunacini discusses in his book how firefighters must be empowered to do the right thing for the patient, customer and the department. Brunacini discusses that does not mean you have to be all things to all people but we must assist the people we come in contact with whose lives have been some way been disarranged by an event that has just brought us together. Brunacini feels that firefighters know better than to leave a family stranded outside their burnt home or a vacationing family outside their wrecked or burned car on the highway. He also feels it's the job of Fire Service executives to teach, mold and lead our organizations to do better. This has to be a lead by example approach to customer service. Brunacini makes many references to modeling expectations. Do whatever it takes to get the job done and

lead by example. Perhaps the most interesting and amazing things about Brunacini's book are that it's all common sense. His programs are not complex and they involve being nice and leaving things better than you found them.

In a related article appearing in the January 1998, *Firehouse* Hal Bruno discusses the Phoenix approach to customer service. He discusses that Chief Brunacini never got a letter from a citizen praising the department on ventilation techniques at a fire but he has received an abundance of letters stating how nice a firefighter was or thanking them for the care they received. With this view on the matter, Bruno discusses how a simple routine run for an Engine or Rescue company can be the traumatic experience of a lifetime for the family dialing 9-1-1. Bruno states that public opinion polls indicate Fire Service personnel as being highly respected by the public. However, he mentions that they were indifferent when it comes to understanding about problems or issues facing the fire service. This is extremely important because we need public support to keep our departments and the fire service viable as the next century rapidly approaches.

In Captain Randy Templeton 1996 article in *Fire Chief*, he discusses change needed in how customer service is viewed by fire service personnel. He describes the feeling that change is unnecessary must be overcome if customer service can truly become a way of life. He discusses comments made by firefighters such as "we have always been customer oriented. Its right there in our mission statement and painted on the sides of our trucks, to protect and serve" (Templeton, p.58 1996). He adds such statements as "Customer service is more important in the private sector, where business compete for consumer dollars. It really does not apply to us" (Templeton, p58. 1996). Templeton acknowledges that it is not the providers of a service but the receivers or customers that define what good service is. He states citizens want additional services without paying more in taxes. They want to see their firefighters (their employees) out of the

station and in the community not just when an emergency is occurring (Templeton, 1996). Templeton makes light that not only are fire service organizations competing with the private sector but with other local governmental entities. In other words, if there is only a limited amount of funding, the public must decide who gets the funding, the fire service, the school system, roads, etc. Templeton, notes that legislative bodies both nationally and locally are “eroding the protective shells that has allowed local governments to operate as monopolies within specific geographic boundaries” (Templeton, p.59. 1996). Templeton, urges customer service be a way of life and simply a program with a beginning and an end. He makes reference to the common statement that Quality is a journey, not a destination. He also warns against programs that are person based rather than organizationally value based. The Austin Fire department felt strongly about this as they added a “Community Services Sector” to their incident command system. This group of field personnel is responsible for providing information to the citizens on what the department is doing and why. This group is actually dispatched to an incident and provide victims access to phones, relay information to crews as to the location of valuables in the house or structure, and conduct a walk-through with the residents to assist with the salvage of their property (Brandewie, p.60. 1996).

In addition to books and periodicals some internal elements were evaluated. Maintaining a good customer service program also means implementing sound Quality Management principles. Discussion was had with PBCFR’s Quality Management Coordinator Craig Whitney. Whitney discussed that the only way to determine the perception the public has on the department is to ask them. The bulk of the information evaluated stated a great deal of similar information. The importance of listening to what the customer needs and to give that to them seemed to be the underlying trend in the literature reviewed.

PROCEDURES

This paper was initiated by determining an area of the Fire Service that needed evaluation and improvement. Initial research was accomplished at the National Fire Academy's Learning Research Center. Additional information was obtained from the Palm Beach County Library system and through discussion with other colleagues. Surveys and other available information already done were evaluated. The problem statement was composed and research was initiated. Customer or citizens complaints were reviewed and a survey instrument was prepared and mailed out. Because of the vast array of services available by PBCFR the survey utilized was specific to Advanced Life Support ambulance transport. As mentioned in the Background and Significance section PBCFR had over 50,000 EMS calls for Fiscal Year 1999. EMS is a very significant part of the mission of the department. From this approximately 20,000 actual emergency transports occurred in a PBCFR transport unit. This is perhaps one of the single most traumatic events in a person's life and this was the type of call the survey was based around. 100 surveys were mailed out at random for the month of August, 1999. Surveys were accompanied by a cover letter, survey, (appendix A), return envelope (postage paid) and phone number to contact if they had further questions. Citizens were explained that all responses would remain anonymous and this study was a tool to let us know how we are doing.

It is understood that the results of the survey would have limitations because only 100 requests for information were sent and over 20,000 transports occurred for the year. This represents only 8 % of that particular month's

transports and less than .5% of the years. The time frame for this research paper was also taken into consideration, thus the customer service overview approach was taken.

The purpose of the paper was to answer the research questions. The project was meant to be an overview of customer service and its importance both locally at Palm Beach County Fire Rescue and the Fire Service.

RESULTS

Through out the research it was evident that there is a great deal of information available on Customer Service. Customer Service has increasingly become a very important issue in many aspects of the public sector and not just Fire Service organizations. Public service organizations are being scrutinized more and more by both elected officials and taxpayers.

Through evaluative research methodology the following questions were answered:

1. Who is the Customer in today's fire service?

This is a simple question at the surface but contains many aspects to formulate a complete answer. Over the past twenty years Fire Service organizations are realizing that Fire is not the customer of the Fire Service but rather people are. The literature review revealed that there are both internal and external customers in an organization. The first answer that comes to mind when asked this question is that the taxpayer who calls us is the customer. However, firefighters are our customer, they are one of the internal customers, they seek

support from administration in a similar fashion as the taxpayer seeks support from them when the call is made. Additionally, the elected city and county commissioners are our customers. We are obligated to them to run an efficient and effective operation. Children are also our customers because we teach them in our public education programs and they bring the information home to their parents who are also our customers. Thus, when the question is asked who is the customer of the fire service, the answer is everyone. We are all obligated to each other. Our support staff, finance directors, vehicle mechanics, etc they are all customers and they all have internal and external customers. The mechanics have customers in the firefighters because they must keep their units running and the mechanics are customers to the firefighters because they must check their units out daily and notify mechanics immediately of problems to minimize breakdowns. As mentioned by Chief Halas in his article the organizational chart can be turned upside down and viewed from a different perspective. It's almost a continuous circle and everyone in the fire service plays an integral role in it.

2. Is Customer service necessary for the survival of today's fire service?

The literature review revealed that the customer is the bread and butter of the Fire Service. As mentioned in Brunacini's book he states that he receives numerous letters and accolades on firefighter's attitudes not on their technical abilities. This means that people want to be first and foremost treated with respect and dignity. Often they do not realize what our Standard Operating Procedures or guidelines are they only judge by how they were treated. This means we must understand the customer and find out what his perceived expectations are. The

survey utilized for this project revealed that people simply want an organization to be nice. Out of 100 Survey's sent out to patients of PBCFR 74 were returned. This is a 74% response rate. Out of the 74, 69 had the highest marks completed on every section of the survey (Appendix A). Additionally, numerous comments were added on how nice, attentive, and polite the crews were. The other 5 surveys had a blend of satisfactory and undecided marks with comments mentioning poor attitudes and behaviors on the personnel's part. There was no mention of poor treatment modalities or not adhering to departmental protocol. The reality is most people do not realize how well the crews know their protocols or how proficient they are with an IV's, fire hoses, or other specialized equipment. What they remember well after the emergency is mitigated is how nice the personnel were and how attentive they were to their needs at the time. The letters received from the surveys often had two or three pages written on how nice the firefighters were and how they locked up their homes, shut their stoves off, took out the trash, etc. The letters and comments did not say how they got the IV on the first try or how well the medication worked on their Chest Pain. The fire service has had most of its success by showing an interest in people. The interest in people and their lives and issues must be fostered for the survival and growth of the fire service

3. What types of practices are changing the way modern Fire

Departments operate in respect to Customer service?

The fire service of today is comprised of a dynamic group of people and is extremely different than the fire service of 20-30 years ago. The biggest change is that fire services and public organizations in general are asking their customers

for feedback on their performance. This feedback allows them to hear from their customers and formulate new programs to satisfy customer expectations. An example of this is fire prevention. The fire prevention Bureau at PBCFR mails out feedback forms to individuals and businesses that were recently served. The purpose of these is to allow the public an opportunity to provide input and feedback to the service and to measure the customer service levels within the fire prevention bureau. The importance of Fire Prevention does not have to be discussed among Executive Fire Officers but the manner in which our personnel execute the message does. If by being nice and courteous and letting the public know we are there for their best interest the message will come out much stronger and the result will be a lower life and fire loss for the community.

4. What are the business considerations of maintaining positive customer service?

The business considerations should be obvious, for any organization to survive it needs people, people on the inside and people on the outside. An organization with happy personnel working there will most likely have happy people going there for business. The Fire Service is no different. When a call is made for a minor emergency such as a small car accident it is only minor to us the fire department because we see them all the time. We must put ourselves in the public's position. This could have been their only mode of transportation or perhaps they cannot afford another car. Maybe this is the first time this has happened to them and they are scared. We often show up ask them if they are hurt and if the answer is yes we tie them down to a wooden board, put them in an

ambulance and tell them everything will be okay. This person is not sure what is happening. Perhaps we should take the extra few minutes and explain the procedures to the individual and let them know what is happening to their vehicle, personal belongings, etc. This alone will go miles in promoting the fire service and to leaving a lasting impression on the individual. After all they will be the ones voting for the support of the Fire department during the next budget year. This alone is an extremely important business consideration.

The EMS/Quality Management section has conducted a variety of surveys and studies on various issues regarding patient care in the PBCFR department. The study evaluated was one on citizen complaints. Through out a one-year period 111 citizen complaints were received through the EMS division at PBCFR. Out of these complaints only 6 or 5% were for excessive response time. The Quality Management section has conducted a variety of surveys and studies on various issues regarding patient care in the PBCFR department. The study evaluated was one on citizen complaints. Of the 111 citizen complaints received through the EMS division at PBCFR, 99 of them or 89% were for items such as unprofessional behavior, lack of compassion and improper care. These are the items we can control, we cannot control response times when no units are in an area but we can influence how personnel act when they are with a customer/patient. Along with complaints PBCFR receives many accolades during a one-year period PBCFR received 239 accolades over double the amount of complaints. Of these accolades 14% were for fast response and 77% were for items such as compassion, professionalism and good treatment. This reinforces

the theory evident in the literature review that people want to be treated with respect and kindness. They want an explanation of what is occurring and would like some sort of tailored service when possible. As Brunacini stated so often in his books and articles, “be nice”. Being nice and considerate is possibly the most important business decision a firefighter can make.

DISCUSSION

The buzz words of the 90's has been to do more with less and during this time everything has been evaluated and everyone is able to freely comment their perceptions. Fire and Emergency services are realizing more than ever that sound customer service is essential for survival in the next century. Understanding who the organization's customer is and how to satisfy them is the single most important thing the Fire Service can do to prepare for the changes to come. Fire Executives must evaluate what the needs of their community, their departments, and their elected officials are in order to formulate good sound plans to please everyone. Fire Executives must remember they are there for the community and a “leader of the future, realizing that vision and implementation are both leadership roles, will learn to care little about defending the traditional hierarchy” (Beckhard, p.81). This is extremely important and Fire Executives must get that message to each person in the organization. Recall who the customer really is in the fire service and that is whom we should be catering to. The organization may have to be turned upside down. “Who are at the top of the upside down organization? The customer contact people. Who are really at the top? The

Customers” (Beckhard, p81). The purpose of doing this is to make the people taking care of the customers responsible and to allow management and support personnel to be responsive to their needs. If the internal customer is happy the external customer has a far better chance of being happy. Thus making the internal customer happy is what the Executive Fire Officer should be working on. Taking care of the employees and showing them recognition can accomplish this. This can be done by something as simple as an awards program recognizing the wonderful and spectacular things our personnel do on a day in day out basis. This will build self- esteem for the individuals and the organization. “Self esteem is an important step in Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs and developing an awards program can help your firefighters reach this step (Weiss, p. 15).

The results of this research fully supported the literature reviewed and surveys reviewed and conducted. Each person has a somewhat individualized definition of Customer Service but the general tone seems to be exceeding people’s expectations. When customer satisfaction is reached it must be recognized both on the internal and external levels.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Research indicates the importance of maintaining good Customer service with both internal and external customers. It is recommended that all departments within PBCFR either implement some type of system to evaluate the customer service given and received within their organization.

As the number of emergency incidents continues to increase, adopting methodologies for managing the customer service on those incidents is

imperative. Using the alternative methods of optimizing the service for the taxpaying citizens of this country is a necessity to compete with the private conglomerates in this arena. In order for this to become reality, a common partnership must exist with all parties involved such as administration, labor unions, and elected officials.

It must be addressed that as with any project do not ask personnel and firefighters to attempt something that is impossible. As Hewitt stated, “To ask Firefighters to do things they are not comfortable with, or not capable of doing is wrong” (Hewitt, p.64). This means offer and mandate training where applicable. Hewitt does also state “the only place where this is acceptable is when a new idea is being implemented on a trial basis” (Hewitt, p.64). This reinforces the recommendation to experiment when necessary by taking calculated risks. Also with this last statement it must be understood that the failure of a project has no correlation with personal or department failure. This is not to discount training because the issue of training and education should not be overrated because they go hand in hand with Customer Service.

The area that an organization chooses to begin with can vary depending on numerous variables. A common problem with many Fire/EMS organizations is that of providing value to the customer on the routine incidents. The Executive Fire Officer could establish a team that represents the organization and empower that team to evaluate this area and come up with solutions to completely satisfy the customer or patient. The team can begin to monitor and track either individual units or personnel and feedback obtained by citizens, customers, patients, etc. Consequently, training should be provided to all pertinent personnel. This would probably be a good time to also offer remedial training where warranted but discuss no discipline only a desire to improve the system and the organization as a whole. The training can be in house and offered during

working hours by present personnel to minimize fiscal impact. Lastly, monitor all progress and publish the organization's progress for all personnel. A reward process can even be offered but use caution to consider one that everyone can achieve not only a few selected individuals. The improvement should also be noted in the service provided to internal customers. This should be a program for the entire organization (from Chief to Firefighter including all support personnel) not just the operations personnel on the street.

It is recommended that Fire Service organizations must realize who their customers are in today's modern Fire/EMS service. Executive Fire Officers must acknowledge every one in their community as a customer and members of the Fire Department must be included in that group. This must not only pertain to firefighters on the street but to clerical and support personnel of the department as well. Fire Executives must take the lead role and reach out to their community and see who the users of the service are and to cater to them.

Fire Service personnel must understand that quality customer service is vital for survival in this new century. Recommendations include establishing new programs that review current service delivered and establish methods to improve that service. The business considerations of customer service must be evaluated.

Furthermore, when a system is altered for any reason make sure another area is not suffering. When implementing or working towards a new system it is imperative all personnel are aware of the plan and have the opportunity to become involved. Discuss and reinforce with all personnel (include top management, elected officials if applicable, and all department personnel) that the goal is to reduce liability, promote the department, and to demonstrate that the department is truly giving their citizens the best possible deal.

Another recommendation is that when all systems are perceived to be at optimum level, is the perfect climate for practicing the ready, fire, aim process

(Hewitt, 1995). This means that the status quo should not be part of a Quality Customer service system. An effective leader should constantly anticipate the future and should always be searching methods for improving the quality of service provided and embarking on a mission to make the fire service a premiere public emergency service at all levels.

The biggest recommendation is that systematic approaches to improve customer service should be utilized. This should involve a strategic plan and include the participation of representative of all ranks. As with any improvement periodic evaluation should be made to insure optimum service to our firefighters and our citizens.

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APPENDIX A

Palm Beach County Fire Rescue **Customer Satisfaction Survey**

Was this your first experience using Emergency Medical Services from Fire Rescue? **Yes or No**

Please **circle** the answer that you feel best describes your experience with our service.

VS= Very Satisfied **S**=Satisfied **U**=Undecided **D**=Disagree **NS**=Not Satisfied

Was the Dispatcher sensitive and understanding when obtaining the information needed? **VS S U D NS**

Did the Dispatcher offer medical assistance and instructions? **Yes or No**

If so were they advantageous? **Yes or No**

Were you pleased with the overall way your 9-1-1 call was handled? **Yes or No**

The Fire Rescue Paramedics arrived in a timely fashion. **VS S U D NS**

The Fire Rescue Paramedics thoroughly explained their procedures and treatment plans to me. **VS S U D NS**

The Fire Rescue Paramedics were organized, thorough, and maintained control throughout the emergency. **VS S U D NS**

The Fire rescue Paramedics treated my family with respect and dignity. **VS S U D NS**

The Paramedics were nice to me and tried to make be feel comfortable during this experience **VS S U D NS**

I felt satisfied with the overall service that I received from Palm Beach County Fire Rescue **VS S U D NS**

Please write all additional comments on the back of this page. Thank you for your time with this survey. Your input will assist us in improving your Fire Rescue department.

Please direct any questions to Chief Michael Arena at (561) 233-0010 x 382.